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Abstract

This essay reflects principally on the work of South African artist Nicholas Hlobo, born in Cape Town in 1975, who has, in a relatively short space of time, achieved international art-world visibility for his sculptural objects made from rubber, fabric, and found objects (often including wood, soap, and colonial-era furniture). I draw for the purposes of comparison on the work of photographer Zanele Muholi (born in 1972 in Umlazi, Durban), an artist-activist whose primary concern is, in her own words, to present 'positive imagery of black queers (especially lesbians) in South African society and beyond' (Muholi 2010 online; Williamson 2009 130). Both artists are well known in South African art circles for work that, although in different media, intervenes in the fields of local gender politics and anxieties about the body politic and the politics of the body – this in a country in which, despite guarantees of freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexuality, it remains dangerous to be identified publicly as lesbian, gay, or transgender.

ANDREW VAN DER VLIES

Art as Archive: Queer Activism and Contemporary South African Visual Cultures

This essay reflects principally on the work of South African artist Nicholas Hlobo, born in Cape Town in 1975, who has, in a relatively short space of time, achieved international art-world visibility for his sculptural objects made from rubber, fabric, and found objects (often including wood, soap, and colonial-era furniture). I draw for the purposes of comparison on the work of photographer Zanele Muholi (born in 1972 in Umlazi, Durban), an artist-activist whose primary concern is, in her own words, to present ‘positive imagery of black queers (especially lesbians) in South African society and beyond’ (Muholi 2010 online; Williamson 2009 130). Both artists are well known in South African art circles for work that, although in different media, intervenes in the fields of local gender politics and anxieties about the body politic and the politics of the body — this in a country in which, despite guarantees of freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexuality, it remains dangerous to be identified publicly as lesbian, gay, or transgender.¹

Hlobo has had a number of solo shows in South Africa, residencies in the Netherlands and the United States, significant project features at the ICA in Boston, Tate Modern in London, and the Liverpool and Venice Biennales, and has received important prizes (Stevenson 2011 online). His queering of Xhosa custom, alongside an investment in a very particular kind of learned (and archaic) Xhosa vocabulary, register, and idiom, constitutes a not-uncomplicated intervention into the ‘archive’ of Xhosa experience that makes possible a nuanced — though perhaps not uncompromised — examination of the secret histories of black gay men. ‘In my work I explore Xhosa traditions or African traditions, and gender issues, with an emphasis on masculinity and rituals’, Hlobo claims (Perryer 2006 4). The archive, for Hlobo, has subversive and liberatory potential.

Muholi’s work has appeared in a number of solo and group exhibitions in South Africa and, since 2006, in group exhibitions internationally. In 2011 alone, her work could be seen in shows in London, Liverpool, Rome, Basel, Ulm, and San Francisco (Stevenson 2011a online). Her various projects share an obviously archival aim: an effort to gather evidence of, and to bear witness to, the lives of ordinary black women who happen to love and are intimate with other women in a society in which public identification as lesbian makes one particularly vulnerable to vicious sexual assault.

Both artists are concerned with forms of archiving and with the idea of the archive: their deployment of very different visual vocabularies tests the limits of representation and of the representable in their own ways; and their works' subversion of 'tradition', in terms of content and form, offers explicit engagements with matter that is traditionally the subject of the archive — with tradition, memory, senses of autochthony, ideas of indigeneity, structures of kinship and affiliation, and markers of gendered identity. By virtue of their ascent to the status of important international art-world practitioners, artists whose work has found its way into gallery spaces and collections around the world, both artists are, furthermore, responsible for work that is *itself* subject to variously inflected impulses to archive.

I want to consider the pay-offs for invoking questions about what archives that engage with or that *are* forms of 'cultural production' might look like, and how they might be read against the grain. In the bodies of work by these artists, I suggest, we find oeuvres — and 'archives' — that repay the posing of such questions. While there have been a great number of important recuperative and activist archiving projects in the gay and lesbian community in South Africa since the early 1990s², I suggest that art might be regarded as functioning as an intriguing archive of queer affect and queer knowledge, and so constitute or make possible a different kind of gay and lesbian — as well as aesthetic — activism.

ARCHIVES OF ACTIVISM AND AFFECT

Art like Muholi's and Hlobo's speaks to tensions between identity and performance, tradition and contemporaneity, in perhaps more dynamic ways than is allowed by a conventional understanding of archives or archiving (for example, of documents and narratives). Here it is useful to invoke Ann Cvetkovich's suggestion that memories of trauma are not ever only recorded or recovered narratively (in text, or orally) but are associated with 'material artifacts' that 'can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value' (7–8). What might serve lesbian and gay histories and activism most usefully, she argues, is 'a radical archive of emotion' that is able to 'document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism' — in other words, those 'areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive' (241). Cvetkovich relies on Lauren Berlant's positing, in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), of an "intimate public sphere," the result of a process whereby "a citizen is defined as a person traumatized by some aspect of life" in the polity — in Berlant's case, the United States (Cvetkovich 15). In this analysis, Cvetkovich suggests, 'U.S. culture's transformation into a trauma culture' represents 'the failure of political culture and its displacement by a sentimental culture of feeling or voyeuristic culture of spectacle' (15). Seeking to outline an archive of affect that does justice to the polysemous performativity as well as the trauma of gay and, in particular, lesbian lives in North America, Cvetkovich makes the claim

that ‘trauma raises questions’ not only ‘about what counts as an archive’, but also about what counts as a public culture’ (10). If it is affect, ‘including affects associated with trauma’ that serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures’ (10), what does this mean for (some American) queers, she wonders.

South African public culture is saturated with ‘affects associated with trauma’, although the grand narrative of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which dominated the second half of the 1990s, has given way to a multitude of other stories — about xenophobic violence directed by the black poor against poor black migrants from elsewhere in Africa, ‘service delivery’ and the costs of neo-liberal economic policies, and ubiquitous sexual violence. Both Hlobo and Muholi explore the affect associated with these very traumas, inviting attention to that which is elided from new national ‘public-culture’ narratives. It seems to me that they seek variously to rehabilitate an affect that refuses the *spectacularisation*, the rendering spectacular, of trauma, and that speaks metonymically for multiple traumatic experiences occluded by the post-apartheid state. By virtue of their international reputations and their works’ entanglement with institutions (commercial galleries, museum spaces, prize-awarding bodies, biennales), their work also raises questions about the economics of cultural value in a world of neo-liberal capitalisation. They work in different media, but some of their central — and, I argue similar — concerns might be discerned, and the productive energies of considering their work together revealed, if we place a work by each artist in conversation.

Consider first Nicholas Hlobo’s large-scale ‘*Phulaphulani*’ (2008) (fig. 1) exhibited as part of the artist’s second show, *Kwatsityw’iziko*, whose title means ‘crossing the hearth’ and alludes to the approach one spouse makes to the other’s bed in a traditional Xhosa dwelling (Perryer 2009 66–67). Figuratively, according to the gallery’s exhibition notes, ‘[i]n Hlobo’s world of metaphor’, this act of crossing might also ‘[describe] the creative process’ (Stevenson 2008 online). The viewer is invited, once he or she has grasped the title’s multiple connotations, to think about physical crossings and acts of linguistic and artistic translation or transformation. ‘*Phulaphulani*’ engages suggestively with all of these processes: stitches made in embroidery thread suture wounds on the skin of the Fabriano paper (itself technically ‘archival’)³, the seams snaking like the wavy tails of an inverted kite or the tracks of an animal. Hlobo has stitched a piece of rubber inner tube, cut into a vaguely zoomorphic shape evoking a tadpole, or perhaps a spermatozoon, in the lower-right centre of the piece, complete with its own mechanical eye — possibly an aperture for air, perhaps for the return of the viewer’s gaze. In the centre-left of the work, two iPod earphones — perhaps the ears of the animal, or the residue of a mechanical presence — are trapped by tendril-like green and skeletal white stitches that suggest something more obviously organic.

‘*Phulaphulani*’ means ‘listen’ in Xhosa but, as the artist explains, “‘*phula*” is [also] to break. So listening is breaking down information from the source.

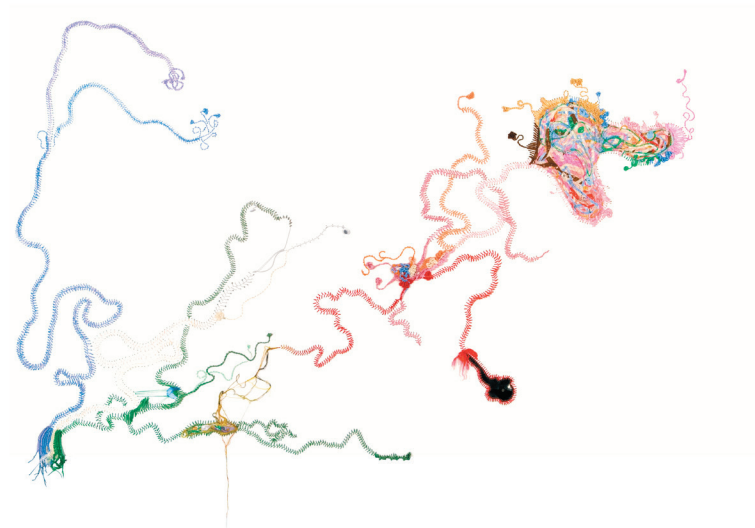


Fig 1. Caption: Nicholas Hlobo, 'Phulaphulani' (2008). Ribbon, rubber inner tube, thread, fabric and iPod earphones on Fabriano paper, 150 x 250 cm (Private Collection, Mauritius). Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/phulaphulani.htm>>.

You pick what you want, take it apart' (Bosland & Hlobo 31). This work is not obviously *about* queer performativity, but its use of materials and technical abilities associated with the domestic and (traditionally) the feminine offers a challenge to what some Xhosa traditionalists might expect from a man. It might also be noted here how the material presence of this work of art, evoking the language of Louise Bourgeois' fabric works⁴ (Allen 100) as well as the grammar of the cut canvasses of Lucio Fontana (White online), invites the viewer to think about surface and depth, and about the metaphorical possibilities associated with assemblage: where work on paper is conventionally regarded as two-dimensional (even if paper is, of course, three-dimensional), Hlobo has paid attention to the paper's materiality and made it more obviously three-dimensional through the addition of thread, rubber, and iPod earphones. He also clearly 'queers' semantics in his title: the apparent disjunct between *listening* and *breaking* speaks to a struggle in his work between paying homage to tradition, and attending to its contingent and syncretic nature.

Now consider Muholi's 'Aftermath' (2004; also published in Muholi's first collection, 2006 20) (fig. 2), a black-and-white image of an unidentified woman, from her lower torso to just below her knees. The title alone offers little to go on: this woman has clearly been the victim of a trauma, an injury to her body — a viewer's attention is drawn to a long scar that runs vertically down the woman's

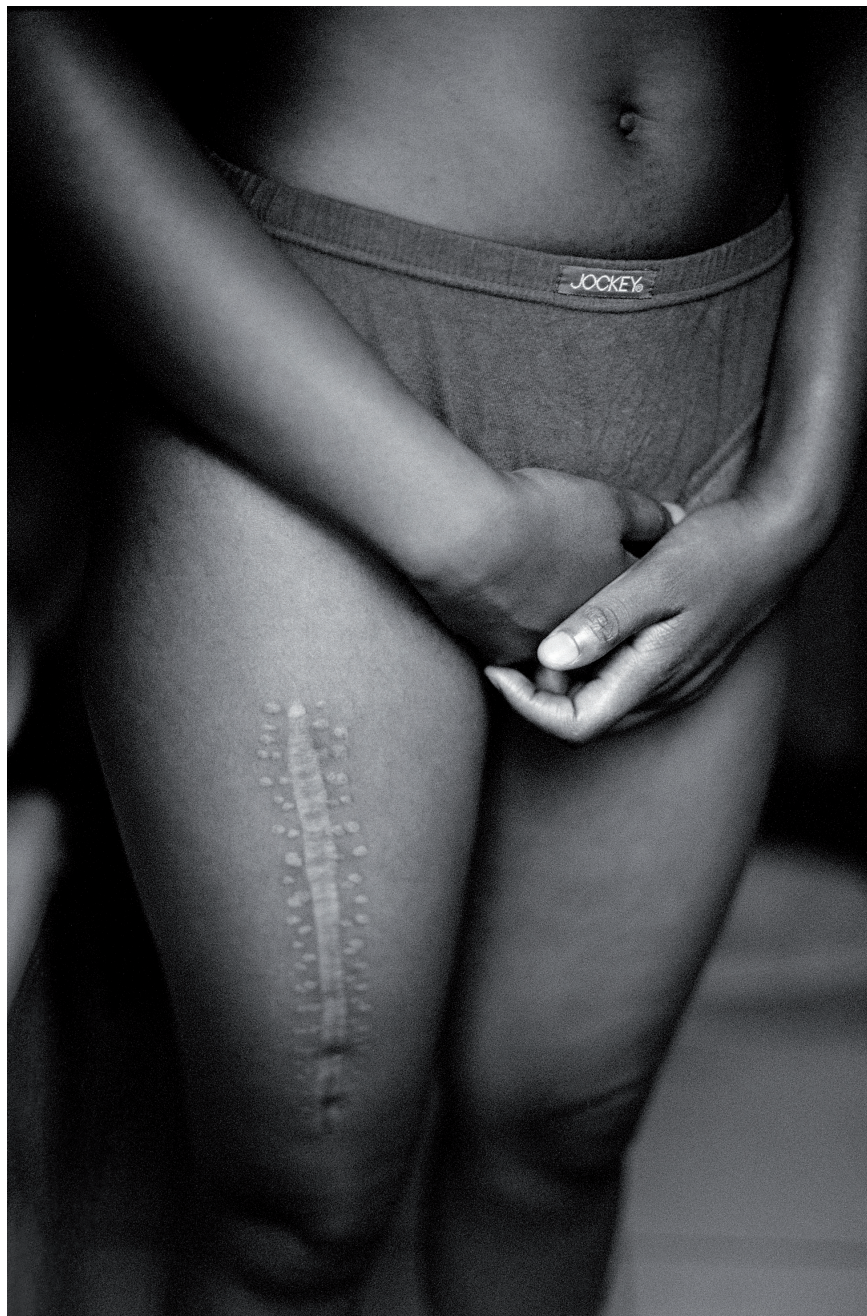


Fig 2. Caption: Zanele Muholi, 'Aftermath' (2004). Silver gelatin print, 600x395mm, edition of 8 + 2AP. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Source:<<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/aftermath.htm>>.

right thigh, from a point level with her groin to just above her knee. The 'Jockey' logo on her underwear might be read as signifying in a number of ways (as I have argued elsewhere [Van der Vlies 4–5]). Among other things, it marks the wearer in a transnational circuit of mainstream commodity culture. It also arguably invokes the spectre of the lawn jockey, and the 'Jockey Club', notorious in nineteenth-century Paris for its members exploitation of economically disadvantaged women (Van der Vlies 4–5). When this photograph was displayed in a 2005 photography exhibition entitled *Is Everybody Comfortable*, held at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town, it was accompanied by a more directly instructive text by the artist herself, which read: 'Many lesbians bear the scars of their difference, and those scars are often in places where they can't be seen' (qtd in Günköl 1). This text suggests unseen scars, and here the subject's apparently demure and protective hand gesture hints at what Muholi explains are called curative or protective rapes, perpetrated with depressing regularity against black lesbian women 'in order', Muholi explains, to make lesbians 'into "real" and "true" African women — appropriately feminine, mothers, men's property' (Muholi 2009 online).

The activist content of this photograph and the hidden trauma to which it witnesses was made explicit in a review of Muholi's first solo exhibition, *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture*, held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in September 2004, which revealed that the subject was a seventeen year-old girl from a township outside Johannesburg, who had been raped by someone she knew (Muholi 2006 91). But as I have argued elsewhere, 'Aftermath' both is and *is not* the photograph of a victim: the subject is not subjected to an invasive gaze that would repeat metaphorically something like the violence to which the photograph — and the scar — attests. The viewer sees neither her genitalia, nor her breasts, and crucially not her face. Her privacy is respected, if not restored, or at least a gesture that insists on the right to expect such is effected and recorded, while her experience is archived. Yet, or because of these gestures, her scars can be read, by virtue of her preserved anonymity, as somehow metonymic, as representative of the scars of others. The dignity with which she is represented renders her an individual, but paradoxically (because she is restored to singularity while also being rendered faceless) one who will *not* be subjected to figuration as a *type* — as she might be were she to be photographed naked, and full-body. There is thus a productive tension between the singularity of the individual rendered other, though not to be objectified, and the type transformed into an allegorical figure, standing for those in the state of similar *aftermaths* (I expand on this in Van der Vlies 2012). As Kylie Thomas puts it: 'The photographs insist on the particularity of the black lesbians they portray at the same time as they insist on their sameness' (434). Desiree Lewis notes that the codes of ethnography and of exotic erotica 'are unsettled as the photographer creates cognitive space for the subjectivity of the woman' photographed (15). In 'Aftermath', Muholi draws our attention to the scar, not to celebrate the scars of the past, but to invite viewers to

be outraged that yet another scar, one that cannot be *seen* has been inflicted; at the same moment, the viewer is also asked to celebrate a tenacity of spirit, and to endorse the right of this woman to love whom she wants.

REPRESENTATION AND THE SEAM

Hlobo has explicitly likened the sutures found in his 'drawings', to processes of 'healing' in post-apartheid South Africa. 'Through stitch', Jessica Hemmings observes, 'he seems to suggest that the damage of apartheid cannot be concealed; rather, recovery should be celebrated instead of being disguised' (41). Hlobo's intention to force our consideration of the mark of the scar, the place of healing that bears witness to the trauma that occasioned it, is not unlike the signifiatory potential of the scar on the thigh of the seventeen year-old rape victim in Muholi's photograph. These works of art are not doing the same work and to read them as conveying 'meanings' that are simply conflated or equated is to do violence to their sophistication and polyvalent suggestiveness. What I am suggesting instead is prompted by the fortuitous congruence of scar-like imagery, and is twofold: that the idea of a suture has metaphoric usefulness; and that representation has also to do with the unrepresentable.

These representations of suturing recall a metaphor that has received much in attention in South African cultural studies over the past decade (and which has perhaps not yet quite reached the end of its usefulness), that of the seam, developed by academic and writer Leon de Kock. Drawing on a passage in Noël Mostert's magisterial study of the centuries-long conflict in the borderlands of the Cape colony (that fall today in the Eastern Cape), and contrasting the idea of the 'seam' (Mostert xv) with that of the purely descriptive 'frontier', De Kock argues that the seam is everywhere in South African writing — although this observation can be productively extended to South African cultural production more broadly. It is to be found in imagery of fissures, frontiers, scars, and in the representation of inequality and conflict. 'To see the crisis of inscription in South African writing following colonization in terms of a "seam" is to regard the sharp point of the nib as a stitching instrument that seeks to suture the incommensurate', he argues (276). Furthermore, De Kock writes, the 'seam' is 'not only the site of difference', but rather 'necessarily foregrounds the representational suture, the attempt to close the gap and to bring the incommensurate into alignment by the substitution, in the place of difference, of a myth, a motif, a figure, or a trope' (276). In other words, the seam marks *difference*, but also *sameness*; it has a utopian impulse, while always also returning attention to the site of the trauma that frustrates that impulse.

If a 'representational seam is the paradox qualifying any attempt to imagine organicism or unity' in South African culture, according to De Kock (277), then for both Hlobo and Muholi the seam *signifies* — that is to say that representations of the seam, as in these particular artworks, *signify*. The representational seam, the point at which the unsayable enters into representation, or at which the difficulty



Fig 3. Caption: Nicholas Hlobo, 'Uzifake zatshon' iinzipho' (2008). Ribbon, rubber, organza and leather on Fabriano paper 152 x 470 x 125 cm (Detail). Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, and Universe in Universe / Magazine / Ampersand [TBC].
Source: Universe in Universe / Magazine / Ampersand.
<http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/magazine/articles/2010/ampersand/img/08_nicholas_hlobo>.

of representing traumas or dualities is staged and to which one must compulsively return, is precisely that to which their representations — here, of literal seams — gestures. We might, in relation to the artworks described above, see the following as the equivalent of De Kock's 'representational seam'. In Hlobo's '*Phulaphulani*', the viewer sees the literal suturing of incisions on the paper, a common technique in his paper works — as made clearer in a detail from '*Uzifake zatshon*' iinzipho' (2008c) (see fig. 3). Figuratively, it is also the place where one meaning of the title word (*to listen, to break*) runs into its opposite. In Muholi's '*Aftermath*', the seam is most obviously the

scar at the site where healing, whether it is completed or ongoing, occurs, the site of a wound wrought by the nexus of homophobia and sexual violence; it is not (only) the scar we see on the woman's leg but the scar that is internal, completely hidden from any gaze except the internal one of the subject herself — a scar that gives the lie to the rainbow nation in more ways than one, and stages the depressing repetition of an act of violence that is, in De Kock's terms, always marked by the seam.

MUHOLI'S ARCHIVE: AFFIRMATION AND MOURNING

How does Muholi's work *signify* in the way I have been suggesting? It constitutes itself as an archive of memory, a statement of presence against exclusionary and homophobic cultural nationalism, seeking to be an affirmative record for queer people themselves. It is 'concerned with many of the same issues of visibility and invisibility that have consumed feminist scholarship since the 1970s', Kylie Thomas notes, citing the artist's statement from an exhibition in August 2009 that '[a]s an insider within the black lesbian community and a visual artist', Muholi



Fig 4. Caption: Zanele Muholi, 'Ordeal' (2003). Silver gelatin print, 600 x 395mm, edition of 8 + 2AP. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/ordeal.htm>>.

sought always to make sure that her 'community, especially those lesbian women who come from the marginalized townships, are included in the women's "canon"' (423). Images from *Only Half the Picture*, some of which were displayed at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004, the Market Photo Workshop, and at Michael Stevenson Gallery in 2006, display this intention — chiefly to record the traumas suffered by black lesbians as in 'Aftermath', but also in work like 'Ordeal', 'Case number', 'Hate crime survivor I' and 'II', and 'What you don't see when you look at me I' and 'II', all 2004 (see Muholi 2006, 15, 20, 16–17, 18, 19, 24, 25). 'Ordeal' (Muholi 2003) displays some of the same complex visual semantics I discussed in relation to 'Aftermath'. The title suggests that something has been endured and overcome — there is no direct evidence of a physical trauma, as in 'Aftermath', although the viewer is invited to make a connection between the woman's activity of washing and an experience she seeks to expunge. My point, which I have elaborated elsewhere (Van der Vlies 7), is that this image, like all of Muholi's

work in this vein, by insisting on anonymity and the non-specific, refuses the grammar of the document. Muholi here does not seek to record the woman in her particularity if that means subjecting her to the gaze of any who might read the photograph as being that (simply) of a naked black woman, available to view and to all that such a view might be thought to entitle the viewer (see fig. 4). Whether or not this framing decision like those which resulted in 'Aftermath' and several other images in this series, assumes a viewer whose gaze *may* likely be tempted into this judgment is a moot point.

Although Muholi is concerned to record and to present, she is also eager to evade spectacularisation because she understands that to do so is, in effect, to erase. Nonetheless, the act of securing — and circulating, displaying, and selling (or allowing to be sold) — representations of these women, is nonetheless not without risk. In one sense at least, the desire to record and to present *polemically* in order to confront the viewer with the fact of black lesbians is a kind of strategically essentialist spectacularisation. Muholi's aim might be considered to be an intentional address to *certain* viewers in particular, viewers like South Africa's Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, who infamously, in August 2009, declined to open an art exhibition on Constitution Hill in Johannesburg that featured Muholi's representation of black lesbians; Xingwana is said to have dismissed the photographs (in a formulation that was widely derided in the progressive media) as 'pornographic' and 'going against nation-building' (Evans 2010 online).⁵

Attentive to what Susan Sontag identified cogently as photography's ready potential to be 'exploitative', and its 'predatory side' (123, 64), Muholi regards it as central to her practice that she treats her subjects — insofar as she knows them all and secures their permission for each and every exhibition and publication of their images — as individuals who demand scrupulous interrogation of the ethical position of the observer-photographer-artist. She seeks always, she claims, to 'establish relationships with' her subjects, many of whom are victims of sexual abuse and violence, 'based on our mutual understanding of what it means to be female, lesbian and black in South Africa today' (qtd in Perryer 2007 64). At each stage in her career to date, the question of audience has been crucial, as has the issue of location and institutional framing; Muholi is keen for her images to be seen, and welcomes such engagements, though she knows that exhibition spaces are not always accessible to those for whom changed attitudes in the community at large would make the most difference (2010a 24). Her caution is also about ongoing safety: *where* the images of black lesbians are seen may have consequences for their safety. In fact, *Faces and Phases*, her most recent project, presents itself in part (as all photography does) as a memorial for several of the subjects who participated in the project and subsequently died or were killed (Muholi 2010b 7). The archival impulse of this aspect of her project could not be clearer.



Fig 5. Nicholas Hlobo, 'Ndiyafuna' (2006). Glass fibre, rubber inner tube, ribbon, jeans, sneakers, lace, wood, 110 x 170 x 100 cm (approximate dimensions).

Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/ndiyafuna.htm>>.

HLOBO'S ARCHIVE: ART AS FETISH

Hlobo's first significant solo show, devoted to his trademark sculptural objects, was *Izele* (2006) (see Perryer 2006). The title refers to birth, and the works shared a concern with genealogy and affiliation, if not always in obvious ways. Liese van der Watt, reviewing the show in the pages *Art South Africa*, noted how its works collectively invited 'conversations about "tradition" and "culture"', yet Hlobo sought to frustrate 'insider readings' of tradition (Van der Watt 69). The 'discomfort' produced by the show's works, she argued, was turned into 'metaphor — metatext even — for identities forged in liminal spaces, that is, on the thresholds and at the boundaries of tradition, ethnicity, culture, sexuality and race' (69). Her meaning is apparent in 'Ndiyafuna' (Hlobo 2006) (see fig. 5). The title means 'I like' or 'I desire' in Xhosa, and in the exhibition catalogue Hlobo explains that he was 'playing with top and bottom, inside and outside' (qtd in Perryer 2006 14). 'Aspects of the work relate to things we know, our particular heritage', he continues: it is, he says, 'as if' the figure in the work has 'decided to go into the bag looking for something. I don't know what this bag contains. This could be a cultural bag. It could be an identity bag' (14).

Hlobo's half-man, half rubber-bag figure seems a creature of liminal space *par excellence*, one either emerging or being swallowed, ingesting or being digested, collapsing the boundaries of the organic and synthetic, the strange rubber sack a cultural goody bag that evokes dangerous auto-erotic asphyxiation. There is an excess of signification, which is alluded to in the title of the exhibition, which might (literally) mean 'someone or something has given birth', but has the additional meaning, according to Hlobo, of 'filling something, or adding to something' (Stevenson 2006 online). Several aspects of the work invite comment here, not least Hlobo's development of a densely layered private system of meaning that draws on a number of semiotic systems: urban youth culture; sado-masochism and gay fetish sub-cultures; and Xhosa tradition, including 'traditional fashion' (Stevenson 2006 online) — he elaborates on the use of pink to suggest not only homosexuality but to evoke the recurrence of the colour in Xhosa beadwork and the use of 'pink pompoms' in the 'headdresses' of the Bhaca people of the Eastern Cape. Rubber suggests 'queerness', he has said, evoking intestines ('the link to man-to-man sex is very strong here'); inner tubes are referred to in Xhosa as '*ithumbi*', the same word for intestine (Hlobo qtd in Perryer 2005 n.p.).

The use of rubber, denim, and lace also suggests something of the fetish. Kopano Ratele suggests that Hlobo's invocation of fetishes inverts the accustomed use of the term: instead of 'finding erotic pleasure in an object or part of a person's body that is not commonly connected to sex', the fetish for Hlobo is 'inverted, directed at evoking something like a sexual experience in others' (Ratele 20–21). I want to foreground what is merely implicit in Ratele's perhaps oversimplified description — the understanding that, for Freud at least, the fetish is primarily a substitute for something whose absence is both recognised and disavowed. 'To put it more plainly', Freud explains, 'the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and — for reasons familiar to us — does not want to give up' (953). Hlobo is interested, even perhaps invested, in absence: the figure in '*Ndiyafuna*' is looking for something; the title of the work itself refers to desire and hence lack. Yet Hlobo seems also to be refusing Freud's linking of homosexuality with the same terror of absence for which the fetish is supposed to compensate, or which it is presumed to displace.⁶ The figure is empowering and without shame; it is simultaneously the object of desire (a half-exposed, *available* male body) and an emblem of *desiring* (the male body exploring something *desirable*), thus evoking, in Hlobo's words, suggestive uncertainty. 'It's playing with the idea of not knowing, the world of the known and the unknown', he explains (qtd in Perryer 2006 14).

Hlobo's use of Xhosa words and phrases to title his works engages with this understanding, almost always subversively. Xhosa, properly isiXhosa, is the second most-spoken home or first-language in South Africa (after [isi]Zulu). Hlobo's studied and consistent insistence on its use for his works' titles effects a self-conscious alienation of the viewer only if the viewer is assumed never to be a

speaker of the language — a point made by Van der Watt in her review of *Izele*: it is ‘a fact that confounds, intimidates and hides its most intimate meanings from its many non-Xhosa speaking’ viewers (69). Joost Bosland, Hlobo’s principal curator at Stevenson, the commercial gallery that represents him, contests the suggestion that language alienates, arguing that Hlobo is always willing to offer elaborations, that he ‘revels in the role of the teacher’ (2009, 110). Given Hlobo’s often highly learned Xhosa, refusing imported words from English or Afrikaans and exploiting the idiomatic nature of the language, his usage might indeed suggest an archival impulse. In his case then, as in Muholi’s, it seems to be an impulse that is not only about preservation of the local and the specific in the face of globalising cultural currents, but also about an active pedagogic impulse. Hlobo explained to Jessica Hemmings that Xhosa had ‘been less respected, hence it never made its way into the high culture and technology in South Africa, whereas English and Afrikaans have been allowed to develop and are in keeping with current global trends and developments in high culture and technology’ (qtd in Hemmings 41). Boston’s ICA offered a useful gloss on Hlobo’s use of Xhosa titles when it hosted a project exhibition in the northern summer of 2008: ‘In the Xhosa vocabulary’, the curators explained, ‘terms are often visually suggested’; ‘[t]he language is loaded with double entendres which Hlobo uses to draw attention to things people are reluctant to discuss openly’ (ICA online). Hlobo’s language ‘overturns prevailing linguistic power structures that aid in shaping the concept of an art gallery, a cultural space largely dominated by white artists and audiences’ (Williamson 2009 132).

I have referred to several instances of Hlobo’s excavation — and queering — of an archive of traditional and linguistic practice, his interest in uncovering moments of ambiguity, places at which one meaning threatens to tip over into another, often with connotations that are subversive of (hetero)normative states or identities. He speaks in interview about being ‘very traditional’ (Bosland & Hlobo 34), but also about the syncretic nature of practices and performances in Xhosa life that are given the status of ‘tradition’. He is clearly aware of the paradoxes involved in claiming cultural affiliations, turning examinations of the porous nature of cultural practice into an exploration both of the elision of queer experience from this archive, but also of the possibilities for its reinscription. So, for example, the exhibition Hlobo staged at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in July 2009, as the recipient of the Standard Bank Young Artist prize, titled *Umtshotsho* which travelled to galleries throughout the country between August 2009 and August 2010), engages with the phenomenon of peer-regulated adolescent societies in traditional Xhosa culture in which mock fights, parties, and non-penetrative sex (*ukusoma*) often takes place between adolescent boys (Stevenson 2009). Hlobo’s family, being Westernised and despising everything to do with ‘the “Red” people, the illiterate *amaqaba*, who smeared themselves with clay and went about naked’, prevented him from having any contact with this culture: ‘I know very little about *umtshotsho*, because I never

went to one', he says (Gevisser 2009 11). The strange, brooding, menacing figures that feature in the installation, constructed from Hlobo's signature rubber inner tubing, ribbons, lace and organza, and called *Izithunzi* ('shadows'), both evoke the syncretism involved in modern 'African' subjectivity, and also gesture productively towards an understanding of the ways in which bodies undergo or are implicated in processes of becoming, of transformation in and through culture, language, and play, how they are disciplined by regimes of the normal — or resist such disciplining. That is to say, Hlobo's figures, largely limbless, unarticulated, nascent assemblages, bodies before or without fixed gender, seem to speak of the somatechnic, 'the mutually generative relation between bodies of flesh, bodies and knowledge, and bodies politic' (Stryker and Sullivan 50).

Colin Richards suggests that Hlobo 'focuses on sexual desire and sexual destiny in a calm, sometimes campish, often amused aesthetic' (251), but I want to suggest that there is much more at stake than this characterisation of the artist as dandy implies. In recent work, Hlobo has continued to explore and interrogate the archive of Xhosa idiom and cultural practice and to probe its interstices for points of queer access that have implications for understanding the borders of the body politic. Large-scale rubber, fabric, and wood sculptures, displayed in increasingly prestigious international art venues, have furthered his examination of the porous boundaries between inside and outside, and extended his visual vocabulary. I have in mind two works in particular, evocations of mythic creatures that also engage with 'becoming-animal' (in the sense theorised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, installations that seek to destabilise gender binaries and regimes of the so-called natural or normal. The first is '*Ingubo Yesiswe*', meaning 'Blanket of the Nation', which formed part of Hlobo's installation (titled *Uhambo*, 'The Journey') at London's TATE Modern (in 2008–2009 [fig 6]).⁷ Trailing for some 30 metres through the gallery space, it was an amorphous assemblage of Hlobo's trademark materials, including rubber, leather, ribbon, furniture and a butcher's hook. Its title refers to the Xhosa ritual in which a cowhide covers a corpse before burial (Greenberg 2009 n.p.). For Greenberg, it is 'like a wounded beast dragging itself forward, weighed down by its accoutrements, including a ball and claw foot — a reminder of the colonial past — and a long tail with bulbous growths', yet it is also vulnerable, with a 'ruptured belly, its innards spilling onto the floor, recalling the ceremonial slaughter of the cow and suggesting discord between the elements' (n.p.).

'*Ingubo Yesiswe*' also evokes a sea creature, as well as Deleuze and Guattari's 'non-productive' 'body without organs' (2004, 8), through which, arguably, it engages with anxieties about queer futurity and reproducibility that are at the heart of many responses to homosexuality and the queer. For Deleuze and Guattari, the 'imageless, organless body' describes the potentiality of the body (imagined virtually), 'perpetually reinscribed into the process of production' (8). And yet we should be cautious about invoking as concrete image these thinkers' metaphor



Fig 6. Nicholas Hlobo, 'Ingubo Yesiswe' (2008). Leather, rubber, gauze, steel, found ball-and-claw chair leg, butcher's hook, chain, 150 x 260 x 3,000 cm (variable).

Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/ingubo2.htm>>.

for desire that resists signification. Perhaps it is more productive to think of how Hlobo seems to engage with their not-unrelated idea of 'becoming-animal', which Marty Slaughter glosses as the process of 'returning to un-organized and dis-organized materiality' (246). Becoming-animal is 'a movement from major (the constant) to minor (the variable) ... in which a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability but is instead folded imperceptibly into a movement ... in flight rather than settled', Gerald Bruns suggests (703–704). In Deleuze and Guattari's own words, '[t]here is an entire politics of becomings-animal ... which is elaborated in assemblages that are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State. Instead, they represent minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions' (2004a 272).

My final example is a work commissioned for the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011 and installed in the 'Illuminazioni' exhibition at the Arsenale, curated by Bice Curiger. Another fantastical creature made from another assortment of found objects, '*Iimpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela*' (Hlobo 2011), a vast sexually indeterminate dragon-like monster hovering menacingly above the gallery floor, dangling its ball-and-claw talons and trailing ribbons, leather and cloth (see fig. 7), offers a more literal 'becoming-animal' and one that attests, too, to the place of sorcery and the fantastic in historical 'becomings-animal' ('It can be said that becoming-animal is an affair of sorcery', Deleuze and Guattari write [2004a

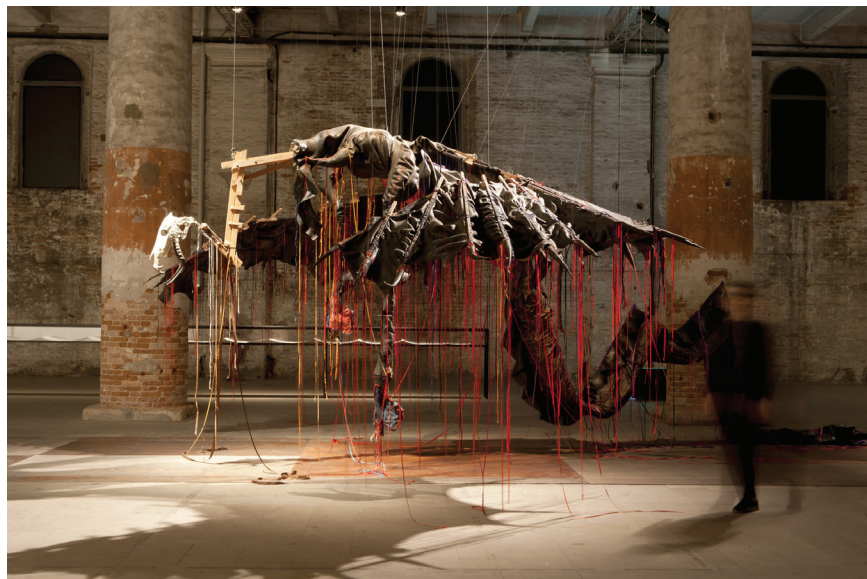


Fig 7. Nicholas Hlobo, 'Iimpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela' (2011). Rubber, ribbon, mixed media, sound, 250 x 460 x 1,000 cm, dimensions variable. Sound recorded by Ndindodwa, Izulu lindila band, duration 23 min 25 sec. Commissioned for the 54th Venice Biennale and installed in the Arsenale. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/iimpundulu.html>>

272]). The work's title, 'All the Lightning Birds Are After Me', Hlobo is quoted as saying, refers to a Xhosa song about a mythical creature that 'at times presents itself as a bird and at times as a handsome young man, but only to women' (Ruiz online). The point of interest here is that this creature is not one thing; it *presents itself* occasionally 'as a handsome young man', and yet this presentation is merely one instantiation in a plane that is flux, movement, sensation, and potential. To quote Slaughter again, this time on Deleuze's understanding of art: 'Art creates something that is not representation, cliché or a conventional way of seeing things, nor is it the visual equivalent of signification separated from bodies and their desires' (243). This, it seems, is precisely what Hlobo is doing here and in '*Ingubo Yesiswe*'. In both cases, the works' rich suggestiveness, creative re-imagination of gender performativity, and the unsettling of boundaries of all kinds, confirms Hlobo as the artist most likely to produce a South African equivalent of works as expansive and mythically complex as Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle, if potentially more politically nuanced and responsive to local conditions — of production, politics, language — and to the politics of the archive.⁸

What is also noteworthy about '*Iimpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela*' is the work's prominence in the art world's most prestigious biennale, where Hlobo was invited to show in a number of exhibitions completely independently of the South African pavilion. Other of his works were installed in the Palazzo Grassi as part

of an exhibition drawn from the collection of French collector François Pinault, and yet more appeared in a show at the Palazzo Papadopoli associated with the Future Generation Art Prize established by Ukrainian collector Victor Pinchuk. '*Impundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela*' had not been on display for more than a few days when it was announced that it had been purchased (speculation had the price in excess of \$250,000) by German collector Jochen Zeitz, Chairman and CEO of sportswear company Puma (Ruiz; Williamson 2011 101).

At this point it is worth recalling another connotation of Ratele's invocation of the fetish in relation to Hlobo's work. If the artist subverts both the anthropological and Freudian senses of the word, what might be said about the relevance of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism (777)? Marx draws on the language of religion and superstition to suggest that, in bourgeois economies, the commodity is fetishistic because it appears to contain value in itself, so obscuring the processes of labour that have produced it. Hlobo's artworks enter into this mystificatory economy insofar as they become commodities in a field operating not only in terms of symbolic capital, as understood by Bourdieu and others, but large sums of money. Early reviewers commented on the pace at which his paper works sold at his second solo exhibition, while the sculptural works remained unsold (Malcolm 97). But Hlobo has clearly entered a stage in his career in which he is likely to become widely known outside of South Africa and achieve significant commercial success. He is at least self-conscious about the institutions that make this success possible, and their structural similarities with some of those his work subverts. His 2008 exhibition at the ICA in Boston included a performance piece entitled '*Thoba, utsale umnxeba*' ('to lower oneself' in a sign of respect) in which, Pamela Allen reports, 'Hlobo sat on an oval nest of *impepho* (curry bush, a spice used as incense in Xhosa rituals), bowing low every few minutes. This gesture of respect had a sarcastic edge: Hlobo was likely to be recognizing his dependence on the assembled patrons for his continued career success' (Allen 1000).

CONCLUSION

Muholi's projects yield multiple photographs, exhibited in gallery spaces and sold in limited editions (usually eight prints and two artist proofs), though they also lend themselves to reproduction in magazines and newspapers, and publication in monographs — two to date. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the politics or aesthetics of their status as reproductions (though it is worth noting that Muholi has been generous with rights to reproduce works for activist — and academic — reasons). It is also worth noting the difference between photographs and the one-off works produced by Hlobo, affordable only by large corporations and very wealthy private collectors.

The motives of those purchasing works by both are doubtless many: they are more likely, in the case of Hlobo's work, to be investment — monetary, and in the prestige of owning and exhibiting such art. It is impossible to assess the extent to which Afro-pessimism, for example, plays in collectors' interest in this work,

if indeed the work is construed as 'African': Muholi's work certainly attests to the bleak conditions faced by gay and lesbian people in (South) Africa. Hlobo's work might attract anthropological interest, though it would be a collector blind to irony who was not aware of the multiple subversions at play in the work. It is not my intention here to interrogate the uses to which these bodies of work might be put: that is, what purposes they might be made to serve. Because they also exist, even in images that survive the sale of the limited edition prints and the unique sculptural objects, as markers of an activist aesthetic that, despite the differences in media and (conjecturally) in the commercial value of the material objects, evidences an impulse to archive, and to revisit the potential of the aesthetic to be archival — and not merely archivable.

Both Muholi and Hlobo present work that grapples with the idea of (sub/)cultural and personal loss, of mourning, and of anxieties about biological reproducibility that are keenly connected with the idea of community and affiliation (including at the level of nation). I have suggested that Muholi's archival projects are testaments to mourning, as well as records of affiliation outside of the heterosexual family structure. Hlobo has called his drawings his 'gay children' (Bosland and Hlobo 2008), and during a 2007 installation performance entitled '*Amaqanda'am*' he sang (according to the exhibition notes) 'in a loud, wailing Xhosa about how, as a gay man, he is repeatedly told that he will not bear children. In response, his song offers his sculptures as proof that he can give birth to something that will outlast his own time on earth' (Perryer 2007 26). Ann Cvetkovich contends that '[q]ueer or nonnormative forms of cultural reproduction open up possibilities for constructing cultural loss as something other than traumatic or irretrievable loss' (122). Muholi and Hlobo would likely both agree that their art enables cultural revision, cultural gain, and aesthetic production (or, in Muholi's case, technically — and technologically enabled photographic — reproduction) that offers a new archive of affect and affiliation.

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NOTES

- ¹ For general contextualising of gay and lesbian issues in the public sphere in South Africa in the last decade, see Reid 2008 and 2010, pp. 39–44.
- ² See further: Krouse & Berman; Gevisser & Cameron; Morgan & Wieringa.
- ³ Fabriano paper is made from cotton and cellulose, is acid free, and regarded in the art world as ‘archival’.
- ⁴ See Celant further.
- ⁵ See Evans 2010a; Van Wyk.
- ⁶ ‘[T]he fetish ... remains a token of triumph over the fear of castration and ... also saves the fetishist from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects’, Freud posits (954).
- ⁷ The exhibition took place in the Level 2 Gallery between 9 December 2008 and 29 March 2009 (see Hlobo 2008a).
- ⁸ Matthew Barney’s five-part cycle, realised between 1994 and 2002, encompassing sculpture, performance, site-specific installation, film and photography, is acknowledged as one of the seminal late-twentieth-century works of multi-generic performance art. See Spector 2003. Pamela Allen also notices the similarities between Hlobo and Barney (2008, 100).

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